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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000502

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TAGS: PGOV KDEM PREL SY

SUBJECT: WAITING TO SAY "YES": ON THE EVE OF SYRIA'S PRESIDENTIAL REFERENDUM

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Todd Holmstrom for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: In the days leading up to the May 27 presidential referendum, the streets of Damascus have taken on the air of a long-running block party, with signs, banners and flags expressing support and even love for President Bashar al-Assad. Pro-Bashar expressions are not limited to Damascus, with banners and tents in urban centers such as Aleppo but also in smaller towns and villages. According to our contacts, there are no formal plans to monitor the voting, although the U.S. and a handful of other embassies intend to do some observing outside polling stations. A human rights contact asserted that the actual percentage of Syrian voters was of little consequence because the regime would manipulate the numbers anyway. Rather, the real goal of the regime was to create a spectacle, or the appearance of a large turnout for the internal and international media, he said. Another theory by opposition leader Riad Seif, is that the regime wants to use the referendum to transform Bashar into an untouchable personality. Voting is expected to conclude on May 27 with results announced the next day. While it is not clear when Assad will be sworn in for a second term, some contacts speculate the oath of office for Assad's second seven-year term will occur before the release of next interim UNIIC investigation report about the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafik Hariri. End Summary.

¶2. (C) THE CAMPAIGN: In the last few weeks leading up to the May 27 presidential referendum, the streets of Damascus have taken on a festival air, with signs, banners and flags, many featuring photos of President Bashar al-Assad, some of which portray him with a firmed up chin and furrowed somber brow. The banners and signs tend to be clustered in main squares and upscale areas of the capital, with sponsorship by prominent businessmen with ties to the regime. An informal survey by the Embassy found that the major campaigns in Damascus have been launched by prominent local businessmen with ties to the regime, including Majed Suleiman (the son of former State Security Chief Major General Bahjat Suleiman), MP Hashem Akkad (a close associate of Asef Shawkat, chief of Syrian Military Intelligence and brother-in-law of Bashar), Mohammad Douba (son of former Military Intelligence Chief Major General Ali Douba), and MP Mohammed Hamsho (a close associate of the president's brother, Maher al-Assad).

¶3. (SBU) Additionally in Damascus, tents sponsored by a range of businessmen and groups linked to the security services of the Ba'ath Party have been erected on busy boulevards, offering music, dancing and refreshments to passersby in the evenings. Several pro-Bashar protests occur each evening, and young upper-class Syrians have taken to

riding around the capital in cars sporting pictures of the President and the Syrian flag. The morning of May 24, at least tens of thousands of people gathered in downtown Damascus for a peaceful pro-Bashar rally announced by Syriatel and attended by the Syrian PM, cabinet members and leading figures from the Ba'ath Party and religious institutions. Another rally is scheduled for May 26. Pro-Bashar expressions are not limited to Damascus. While banners and tents proliferate in urban centers such as Aleppo, a May 24 visit to a string of small towns and villages outside Damascus revealed that commercial areas were festooned with signs and tents in support of the President.

¶4. (C) BRINGING OUT THE VOTE: Civil society activists told Charge at a May 22 working lunch that on referendum day Ba'ath Party affiliates such as workers unions, student unions, and professional associations will be out in force to drum up and compel the Syrian electorate to turn out the vote. All in attendance, however, thought that turnout would be no higher than it was for the April 22-23 parliamentary elections. Other contacts contradict this prediction, insisting that not participating in a presidential referendum is a red line that most Syrians will be loathe to cross. (Note: Official estimates put the parliamentary turnout at more than 56 percent, with contacts privately estimating it at a much lower level. In 2000, Syria's Interior Minister reported that almost 100 percent of eligible voters turned out to vote in the presidential referendum, with Bashar al Asad getting more than 97 percent of the ballots cast, according to media reports. End Note.)

¶5. (C) ASSESSING THE REFERENDUM: According to our contacts, there are no formal plans to monitor the voting or turnout by

DAMASCUS 00000502 002 OF 002

domestic or international groups, although the U.S. and a handful of other embassies intend to do limited observing outside of polling stations in Damascus and in a few other major urban centers. The head of a human rights group asserted, however, that the actual percentage of Syrian voters was of little consequence because the regime would manipulate the numbers anyway. Rather, the real goal of the regime was to create a spectacle, or the appearance of a large turnout for the internal and international media, he said. Another theory according to opposition leader Riad Seif, is that the regime is seeking to transform Bashar into an untouchable personality, in the style of former President Hafez al-Assad. The referendum serves as a good catalyst for this transformation, which is also linked to the regime's fear that Asad will be held accountable by Lebanon's international tribunal, and to the regime's conviction that Syrians will be more apt to rise to his and the regime's defense if Bashar has made himself such a symbol of Syria that any effort to hold him accountable will be seen as an attack on the dignity of Syria, Seif indicated.

¶6. (SBU) MECHANICS OF THE REFERENDUM: On the day of the May 27 presidential referendum, polling places around the country are expected to open at 0700 and close at 2200. Syrians may also vote at the borders and in Syrian embassies and consulates overseas, according to an announcement by the Ministry of Interior in mid-May. Voters must be 18 and not have been stripped of their rights (by having been convicted of a felony, for example). Eligible voters must bring to the polling place proof of identity and/or their electoral card. Voting is not obligatory but is encouraged; some contacts have indicated to us in the past that many Syrians will vote to avoid future trouble with the security services and police when seeking government services. A May 22 statement by the Ba'ath Party's Regional Command noted that "the people of Syria are waiting for May 27 to say 'yes' to President Bashar al Asad in expression of the people's aspirations and adherence to the national and pan-Arab principles," according to the official English language Syria Times.

¶7. (SBU) On referendum day, it is expected that, as in the

past, voters entering the polling station will be handed a piece of paper with two circles--one green signifying "yes" and one black signifying "no." Voters will not have their hands marked with indelible ink, as occurred in the April 22-23 parliamentary elections, according to a Ministry of Interior civil servant who answered a ministry hotline dedicated to the referendum. The Minister of Interior is expected to announce the result of the vote on May 28, and, while it is not clear when Assad will be sworn in for a second term, some contacts speculate that this will occur before the release of the next interim UNIIC investigation report about the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafik Hariri.

CORBIN